

TRAVEL

In Hong Kong's Kowloon, the Markets Rule



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Shopping is the draw in the Sham Shui Po district, where the markets truly capture the essence of Hong Kong. Pierfrancesco Celada for The New York Times

My grandmother and I walked along Kweilin Street in Kowloon, near the Sham Shui Po rail station, where the open-air market was a scene of controlled chaos.

Along a stretch of five or six blocks, vendors selling everything from wristwatches to dish towels to pirated DVDs began their operations on the sidewalk and bled into the street. Hundreds of people walked along the street as if it was a pedestrian promenade, which it isn't — every now and again a car would patiently maneuver through.

In Hong Kong, the market rules. The former British colony has thrived as an economic powerhouse under the “one country, two systems” policy developed under Deng Xiaoping.

The result is one of the most fiercely competitive, densely populated, commerce-driven cities in the world. It’s also one of the most astonishingly expensive. On a recent visit, though, I was able to manage a fairly economical stay, all while enjoying the food, attractions and electric environment that the “fragrant harbor” (the literal translation of Hong Kong) has to offer.

I focused my energy on the Kowloon peninsula, which is a bit grittier and less touristy than Hong Kong Island, just a few thousand feet away across Victoria Harbor.

The biggest expense when staying in Kowloon will inevitably be housing. I confess that I cheated, as I have family members who live about an hour out of the city center, and with whom I stayed for most of my trip.

I did spend a night at the Silka West Kowloon Hotel, paying \$157 for a double room. The hotel was bare-bones and my room slightly cramped, but it felt safe and was reasonably clean.

If you want to go the hostel route, the Ashoka Hostel has beds in mixed dorm rooms that run around \$15 to \$20. (Its website didn’t work for me; use a site like Hostelworld to book instead.)

The Mei Ho House, a converted 1950s resettlement block, has double rooms that run around 1,250 Hong Kong dollars a night (about \$161) and dormitory beds for about 290 Hong Kong dollars.

Beyond lodging, travel essentials include a SIM card for your phone and an Octopus pass, a rechargeable card used to get around on public transportation. I bought my SIM card at one of the ubiquitous 7-Elevens in the city. For 140 dollars (less than \$20), I got a local calling plan and five gigabytes of data — plenty for a short trip. I primarily used the data for maps and train and bus schedules (Google Maps does a decent job).

The Octopus card is used on the train, bus and even in some stores and restaurants. The cards can be purchased for 150 dollars (50 of which is a refundable deposit) from the service centers at most Mass Transit Railway (M.T.R.) stations.

The Hong Kong subway is exceptional: clean, efficient and inexpensive, though train cars are often overcrowded. Fares typically range from 3 to 10 dollars, and rarely over 20, depending on the distance. Buses are slightly less predictable, but necessary to get to places the train doesn’t reach. Double-decker buses are common, as are smaller 16-seaters.

The winding, narrow streets of Kowloon can be difficult to navigate, but I was lucky enough to have a resource in Daisann McLane, a former Frugal Traveler columnist who now lives most of the year in Hong Kong.



A woman takes a selfie on the Tsim Sha Tsui promenade in Kowloon, with Hong Kong island in the background. Pierfrancesco Celada for The New York Times

We met on a slightly brisk evening in Tsim Sha Tsui, the glittering, shopping-heavy (and fairly tourist-laden) area of Kowloon near the harbor. She immediately led me out of the neighborhood farther north, promising me a more local experience.

“When the weather starts to chill, everyone lines up for bo zai fan,” she said, referring to clay pot rice, a traditional Cantonese dish. We exited the Yau Ma Tei M.T.R. station after a short ride (4.50 dollars) and almost immediately saw a line down Arthur Street at the popular Four Seasons Pot Rice.

We lined up at the slightly less popular, but still excellent, Hing Kee Claypot Rice, dodging an imperious dishwasher carrying a load of bowls as we joined the line. “In Hong Kong,” Ms. McLane said, “the dishwashers get paid more than the cooks.” If the dishwasher stops working, the whole restaurant shuts down.

I ordered a bowl of clay pot rice with white eel (58 dollars), and we shared a fried pancake dotted with fat, juicy oysters (35 dollars). The clay pot emerged perilously hot, the rice audibly crackling under slices of bone-in eel. We crunched on the slightly burned bits of rice from the bottom of the bowl. It was simple, warm and comforting.

Afterward, we walked over to the Yau Ma Tei wholesale fruit market, in the shadow of crumbling, rickety old shophouses. The market, which is active throughout the night, really ramps up in the early morning hours. Some of the fruit is outrageously expensive, and that helps explain why fruit is such a common gift in Chinese culture. A beautiful imported Japanese watermelon was an absurd 350 dollars — nearly \$50. I bought a few apples for my grandmother and paid a more reasonable 12 dollars each.

Other worthwhile attractions in Kowloon are cheaper still: The Hong Kong Museum of History has some fantastic, informative exhibits and is free. There are areas dedicated to the city's maritime beginnings, as well as rice cultivation, Chinese opera and the traditions of burning incense and paper offerings. There are impressive detailed replicas of streets and businesses as the exhibit moves chronologically forward through the cession of Hong Kong to the British through the Japanese occupation during World War II.

On another day, I went for a walk through Kowloon City, a section of town that partly includes an actual walled city with a history that can be traced back centuries and was demolished in the 1990s (it's now a public park).

I went to the Lian Fa Cafe, a cozy restaurant that specializes in traditional Hong Kong cafe cuisine, a mishmash of Chinese and Western cooking. I ordered a fat piece of French toast with a thick slice of butter and a floral Hong Kong milk tea for 38 dollars.

From there, I strolled through the Kowloon Walled City Park, stopping to look at the ruins of the original south gate of the city.

Ultimately, though, the markets are what truly capture the essence of Hong Kong. As my grandmother and I walked that afternoon among the busy vendors on that not-really-pedestrianized Kweilin Street in Sham Shui Po, I asked her about Hong Kong's huge, distinctive apartment blocks, the facades of which are dotted with air-conditioners and drying clothing. "People were living in shanty towns in the hills after the war, so the government built all of this housing," she said.

We took a turn into the multilevel Pei Ho street market, a sobering, indoor scene of fresh produce, live chickens, quivering pig carcasses, slithering eels in Styrofoam crates and nearly anything else you could think to eat.

On the top floor of the market, we grabbed a very good lunch of steamed pomfret with black bean sauce, greens and a half chicken for 165 dollars at the New Kam Dor Po Kitchen on the top floor of the market, then tried to find her childhood home on Kweilin Street.

We reached the address, only to find that the building had been torn down long ago. "Oh, of course it's gone," said my grandmother, unsurprised. Everything had changed so much, she said, but the spirit of the place was more or less the same. And with that, she happily posed for a picture in front of the new building that stood at her old address.

Correction: December 4, 2016

The Frugal Traveler column last Sunday, about the Kowloon area of Hong Kong, characterized Hong Kong incorrectly. It is a city, not a country.